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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature defines the concept of student empowerment, discusses the implications of student empowerment in educational settings, and outlines strategies for facilitating increased empowerment. A definition of "empowerment" as "bringing into a state of belief one's ability to act effectively," is offered and the critical importance of effective relationships between teachers and students is stressed. Principles of mutual respect, validation, and a focus on success are seen as empowering both students and teachers. Increased teacher empowerment is seen to be facilitated by encouraging teacher ownership of change, teacher choices, professional autonomy, decision-making, responsibility, independence, risk-taking, collaboration, and self-evaluation. Empowered teachers are expected to empower students. Corollaries of the empowering philosophy concerning conceptions of learning, knowledge, development, and classrooms are outlined. (Contains 9 references.) (DB)

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Student empowerment and the ability of educators to empower students is fundamental to students' academic success. This paper will provide a definition of empowerment, discuss the implications of student empowerment in educational settings, and outline strategies for appropriate implementation of empowerment strategies.

In her article entitled *Defusing "Empowering": The What and the Why*, Leslie Ashcroft (1987) defined empowering as "bringing into a state of belief one's ability to act effectively". Ashcroft asserted that empowering clearly embodies a principal role for the teacher in facilitating, directing, focusing, and fueling in his or her interdependent relationship with pupils. She further defined empowering as nurturing belief in capability and competence, suggesting potency and the positive impetus to action.

As indicated in Ashcroft's definition of empowerment or empowering, teachers play a crucial role in this process by the initiation and facilitation of effective relationships between teachers and students. In an article on the relationship between the perceptions of preservice teachers and minority student failure, Dr. Johanna Nel examined the type of relationship between students and teachers that serves to nurture and build self-confidence in students. She defined these relationships as "empowering relationships". She suggested that the effectiveness of these relationships in empowering students depend on the extent to which teachers:

1. incorporate students' language and culture into the culture into the school program;
2. encourage minority community participation as an integral component of children's education;
3. promote intrinsic motivation in minority students to use language actively to generate their own knowledge; and
4. become advocates for minority students in assessment procedures. (Nel, 1993)

Nel's research on the importance of the student/teacher relationship in minority student achievement is in close correlation to the research done by Cummins (1986, 1989) in analyzing minority students' school failure. Cummins suggested that schools are failing because the relationships between teachers and students and between school and minority communities have not altered in any significant way. According to Cummins, the required changes in relationships involve personal redefinition of the way teachers interact with their students and with the communities from which the students come (Nel, 1992).

Current literature and research on student empowerment indicates the importance of students believing in themselves and teachers playing a viable role in facilitating that process by incorporating the students' cultures and languages into the program, inviting participation in the classroom by members of the students' community, and demonstrating advocacy.

In empowering students to achieve academically, teachers must also themselves feel empowered. Traditionally, schools have not empowered teachers or children. They have had little to say in the decision-making process (Stone, 1995). In her article entitled, *Empowering Teachers, Empowering Children*, Dr. Sandra Stone identified several areas in which empowering both students and teachers would improve their views of learning and work. Those areas include:

1. *Respect.* The empowered teacher is viewed as a respected professional who has the knowledge and ability to participate in the school's change. Respecting children involves recognizing and accepting who they are and what they do. Individual learning rates and styles must be respected and honored.
2. *Validation.* Validation often means sharing your knowledge of an individual's worth with someone else.
3. *Success.* We should not diminish teachers' status by focusing on weaknesses; rather we must acknowledge their strengths. Drucker (1989)

> suggested that "education must focus on the strengths and talents of learners so that they can excel in whatever it is that they do well ... one cannot build performance on weakness, even correct ones. One can build performance only on strengths".

Respect, validation and a focus on success establishes a positive foundation for empowering both teachers and children. Stone asserted that further empowerment can be facilitated through the following methods:

1. *Ownership*. Ownership gives teachers the sense that they have as much right as administrators to make changes. Ownership for children is the feeling that the classroom is theirs, too, not just the teacher's... . (Robinson, 1994)
2. *Choice*. Teachers should be able to make choices about curriculum, instructional materials, even staff. Choice for children may take many forms. They may choose what they want to study, how they will study it, which centers or projects they would like to experience, and how long they will spend on learning experiences.
3. *Autonomy*. Teachers need to be able to set their own goals and action plans, and children should be able to set their own goals and chart their own progress.
4. *Decision-making*. Empowered teachers decide what to teach, how to teach, what materials to use and how to assess students. Empowered children also make decisions that affect the classroom, including what topics to pursue and how to implement curricular choices. According to Kohn (1993), children learn how to make decisions by making decisions, not by following them.
5. *Responsible*. Empowered teachers and children become increasingly responsible for the decisions that affect their lives. As Kohn (1993) noted,

"If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it".

6. *Independent.* Stone asserted that when teachers are empowered to make their own decisions, the teachers initially exhibit high degrees of dependency. The principal's encouragement helped the teachers become independent.

7. *Risk-taker.* Empowered teachers also experience the freedom to take risks, which is important for growth and change. Empowerment releases the bonds of failure and frees children to go on learning.

8. *Collaborator.* Empowered teachers are more at ease collaborating, for they feel less of a need to compete. Empowered children also enjoy the lack of competition with others in class, and tend to be more thoughtful and cooperative.

9. *Self-evaluator.* The empowered teacher continually evaluates established goals in order to formulate new ones. Empowered children engage in self-evaluation in order to set their own learning goals.

Stone (1995) concluded by asserting that empowered teachers use support and wisdom to empower their students. Empowering children actually frees the teacher to join children in facilitating growth rather than constantly monitoring, directing and supervising the children's learning and behavior.

In a final discussion about student empowerment, this concept shouldn't be seen as something to be done during certain hours of the school day or certain periods of week. Ashcroft (1987) asserted that empowering is conscious and committed and pervasive or it is ineffectual and, by definition (belief, capability, effective action), therefore nonexistent. When we talk conscious, committed beliefs and pervasive, consistent, congruent theory and practice, we are talking philosophy. Empowering in schools needs to be a philosophy of education.

According to Ashcroft, an empowering philosophy has several important corollaries to note. They are:

1. Conceptions of *learning* as something that happens to an individual, as an internal and subjective action, as a process of inquiry and discovery;
2. Conceptions of *knowledge* as something that can be only be personally acquired and not given, as truths in each of us rather than as fixed and finite truths "out there";
3. Conceptions of *development* as personal growth, as the transformation or change of powers already present; and
4. Conceptions of *classrooms* as communities of learners helping each other to transform latent capabilities to active powers for the enhancement of all.

Student empowerment is crucial to the personal, intellectual, and educational growth of students. Teachers must realize their role in this process, and acquaint themselves with empowerment strategies to implement in both their classrooms and in the curriculum. They must also be aware of the correlation between their perceptions of their students and those students' academic success. Finally, in order for students to truly become empowered, the concept of empowerment must be seen as more that just another strategy for boosting academic success. It must be seen as a philosophy of education that can help students to be productive in school as well as become productive members of society.

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